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TAGS: PREL PHUM PBTS KDEM KISL AJ

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ALIYEV REJECTS CRITICISM ON MEDIA  
FREEDOM, ACCUSES U.S. OF "DOUBLE STANDARDS"

REF: BAKU 306

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse per 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In an April 15 meeting with visiting Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) President Jeff Gedmin, President Aliyev firmly denied that Azerbaijan has any problems in the area of media freedom, and accused the U.S. of applying a "double standard" in its criticisms. The President also alleged that U.S. funding for Radio Liberty and for local NGOs linked to the opposition amounts to supporting his "enemies." Aliyev also expressed his frustration with the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process and Armenian intransigence in the face of clear international reaffirmation of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On April 15, RFE/RL President Jeff Gedmin, accompanied by the Ambassador, PAO and RFE/RL staff, met with President Aliyev. Aliyev was accompanied by presidential advisors Ali Hasanov and Novruz Mammadov.

Nagorno-Karabakh Remains Top Priority

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¶3. (C) President Aliyev outlined Azerbaijan's primary challenges, especially NK, and relations with Russia and Iran. Aliyev explained that the "occupation of our territory" and a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is Azerbaijan's top priority. Fourteen years of diplomatic efforts have failed to reach a solution, he complained, and Armenia continues to ignore explicit language from the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and NATO reaffirming Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. &Nobody does anything to at least try to persuade them to change their position,<sup>8</sup> Aliyev said. All of Azerbaijan's remaining challenges - whether social, economic development or execution of energy programs - are minor in comparison and can be solved with Azerbaijan's own resources and capacities. By way of example, Aliyev claimed that his government has successfully spurred economic development in the regions and the creation of 600,000 jobs in the last four years.

¶4. (C) Returning to Nagorno-Karabakh, Aliyev said that Azerbaijan seeks to resolve the conflict &jointly and peacefully.<sup>8</sup> Azerbaijan's patience and its commitment to a peaceful solution reflects that we do not want a new war. But we cannot live in this situation any longer. He said peace had previously been maintained by Azerbaijan's peaceful approach and a balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the region, but "today this does not exist." Azerbaijan, he argued, has an economy that is two or three times the size of Georgia and Armenia's together - "they cannot compete." Armenia is a "poor" country with "no

"future" that is destined to become (or already is) a "satellite of Russia." All they have, Aliyev claimed, is a diaspora with influential Armenians and lobbies in other countries that provide financial assistance and engage in propaganda efforts on Armenia's behalf.

Aliyev's Views of Russia, Iran

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¶ 15. (C) Asked about his views of his larger neighbors, Aliyev said that the situation in Russia is clear - there has been a "transition" without any real "change" in leadership. Notwithstanding its energy resources and USD 500 billion in reserves, Russia has "fundamental problems," including regional poverty especially in Muslim areas, a demographic catastrophe which it is not disclosing, and a serious imbalance in its distribution of wealth. Citing the GOAJ efforts to offer preferential loans to the private sector and make the foreign investment climate here one of the best in the CIS, Aliyev argued that Azerbaijan has no such imbalance and is working hard to promote social equality. Aliyev conceded that Russia is strong politically and that Azerbaijan seeks "normal" relations with its northern neighbor, but asserted that Azerbaijan is the only country in the region that is not dependent on Russia for energy or its energy transportation network.

¶ 16. (C) Iran is a different story, Aliyev continued. It is a closed society and there are multiple levels of control that limit public discussion. Ahmadinejad is internally-focused, unlike his predecessor. Iran has tried, in the past, to interfere in Azerbaijan by targeting poor refugees with its propaganda, sending mullahs here, training Azerbaijanis in Iran. Now, however, Aliyev said, Azerbaijan is not so poor, it has the means to defend itself, and the Iranians have

realized that Azerbaijan's secular society is not receptive to these religious messages. The recent arrest of a dangerous group of Iranian spies and an Iranian-sponsored newspaper article critical of Mohammed shows that the threat still remains, not merely from Iran, but also from religious extremism from Chechnya and elsewhere.

¶ 17. (C) Azerbaijan is surrounded by religious extremism, in the north by Wahabbism in Chechnya, in the south from Iran, and now from the Turks as well, Aliyev said. Though Turkey's leaders are clear about Turkey's commitment to secularity, some thing Turkey's secularity is in doubt, Aliyev said. &We see them prohibiting alcohol in some regions, what's next?<sup>8</sup> Noting that &our statehood and security is our top priority, and we must be able to protect ourselves, Aliyev told Gedmin that &cooperation with Europe and the West is the way to strengthen our independence and secularity.<sup>8</sup>

Media Freedom and "Double Standards"

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¶ 18. (C) Gedmin thanked Aliyev for the summary and expressed his gratitude to the GOAJ for creating the conditions that have allowed Radio Liberty to establish a local bureau and broadcast 10 hours of daily programming on an FM frequency (shared with Voice of America). Gedmin added that the primary focus of Radio Liberty is to provide professional, objective information and to promote Western, democratic values. Gedmin confessed that none of this would be possible without the good cooperation from the GOAJ. At the same time, Gedmin expressed his concern about the deteriorating state of media freedom in Azerbaijan and, in particular, the need to physically protect journalists from assault. Gedmin noted that his views reflect those of many in Washington and in the U.S. Congress - Azerbaijan is a critically important country, but the perception from abroad is that there are serious problems in the area of media freedom.

¶ 19. (C) In a calm and unemotional tone, Aliyev replied that "we have no problems in the area of media freedom." He asserted that Azerbaijan is completely free in this regard; there is no censorship. Aliyev said that he does not share

the views of "foreign representatives" who have leveled such criticism against Azerbaijan. Media freedom is stronger here than in some developed democracies, he argued. Hundreds of newspapers, internet portals, and even foreign broadcasters operate freely here and the GOAJ has no plans to restrict these activities. Aliyev asked rhetorically why he would be pushing to expand internet access to all of the country's schools if he were trying to limit freedom of expression? Each of the alleged violations of media freedom has its own "unique" circumstances and such cases arise everywhere, not merely in Azerbaijan. &Every case has its own story, not related to our agenda and our policies. Attempts to exaggerate the role of the (Azerbaijani) government are inappropriate," he asserted. Aliyev dismissed the latest incident involving Azadliq journalist Agil Khalil as having been perpetrated by someone "sharing his values" (Note: This is a clear reference to the GOAJ-sponsored smear campaign in which they claim that Agil Halil was stabbed by his homosexual partner).

¶10. (C) Aliyev admitted that Azerbaijan is a young democracy and claimed that he is "open to criticism." All countries have such problems, he continued, but if the criticism leveled against Azerbaijan is not the same as criticism leveled against other countries, then "we will reject it." &If it is justified and universal, we are ready to work on it.<sup>8</sup> Pointing to what Azerbaijan sees as the muted response to the recent crackdowns on civil liberties and police violence against protestors in Georgia and Armenia, Aliyev said "we will not accept a policy of double standards." He observed that such a policy is not merely "continuing," it is actually "strengthening." The period when Azerbaijan accepted different standards than those applied to Armenia and Georgia &is over,<sup>8</sup> Aliyev said. &We want the same approach.<sup>8</sup>

¶11. (C) In response, Gedmin argued that Radio Liberty was the only broadcaster to stay on the air (by means of cross-border transmissions) during the crisis in Georgia and that he had personally told President Saakashvili when they met two weeks ago that what he had done was wrong. Regardless of the actual state of media freedom in Azerbaijan, Gedmin argued that there is definitely a "perception" of a problem. He urged Aliyev to "use" Radio Liberty as a platform to make its case and suggested that Aliyev personally grant Radio Liberty an interview.

¶12. (C) Aliyev thanked him for the offer, but noted that he had "information" that Radio Liberty broadcasts are "one-sided" and "unbalanced." Aliyev claimed that his office had monitored the station for the last month and that the results were very disappointing. Aliyev claimed that listening to such criticism on their own radio frequencies demands considerable patience. "We are not perfect, but international donors should not finance the opposition through NGOs and should not interfere with our internal affairs," he remarked. The opposition "had their chance," Aliyev claimed, "but could not deliver." (Comment: This appears to be a reference to 1993-1994 when Musavat Party leader Abulfaz Elcibey was President.) "We have managed to deliver," Aliyev argued, adding that he personally, - the MFA,<sup>8</sup> has determined that Azerbaijan pursue a foreign policy aimed at integration with the West. Azerbaijan is a friend to the U.S., Aliyev said, but if we are friends "why am I under attack by organizations linked to the U.S.?" &We are not helping your enemies, we are working against your enemies. We have a right to expect fair treatment, but we don't see that."

¶13. (C) Gedmin concluded by noting that Americans deeply appreciate Azerbaijan's strategic orientation and argued that Radio Liberty should not support the opposition or attack the government. Instead, Radio Liberty should be fair-minded. Gedmin did not, however, that Radio Liberty would always be partisan in defense of democratic values. He invited Aliyev to share any evidence of mistakes or bias in Radio Liberty reporting and offered to address such concerns. He added, however, that the USG is not always happy with everything in

the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal. Aliyev agreed and said that his advisor and Head of the Department for Social and Political Affairs Ali Hasanov would provide the information requested.

Comment

¶14. (C) Maintaining the same tough tone that he exhibited in his last meeting (reftel), Aliyev's remarks appear to reflect a clear decision to reject any criticism on media freedom or democracy until the GOAJ is satisfied that Azerbaijan is receiving the same treatment as Georgia and Armenia. It is unclear whether Aliyev actually believes that the imprisoned journalists are guilty of the crimes with which they were charged or whether Agil Halil was actually stabbed by his homosexual partner, but he is clearly determined to reject any criticism regarding their cases. At the same time he is being provided with (or is actively seeking) information to suggest that U.S. support for NGOs, and Radio Liberty, amounts to "unfriendly" support for his "enemies" and an attack on him and his government.

¶15. (C) Aliyev's real priority, however, remains Nagorno-Karabakh. Although he did not directly articulate a request for greater U.S. support for a resolution on his terms, this unstated desire lurked behind much of the discussion of media freedom and democracy. Notably, while Aliyev opened the discussion with Gedmin by a lengthy discourse on NK, in a cordial meeting the next day with visiting DOD DAS Daniel Fata on a bilateral security relations (septel), the NK issue was barely raised, leading us to conclude that the GOAJ is translating its disappointment with U.S. support for Azerbaijan's position on NK into a harder line on democratic reform, under the convenient umbrella of recent developments in Armenia and Georgia.

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